THE QUALITY OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN GOVERNMENT PRESCHOOLS IN JORDAN

By

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DEDICATION

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LIST OFABBREVIATIONS

ECERS-R	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised
MoE	The Ministry of Education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ERfKE	Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

KUALITI PERSEKITARAN PEMBELAJARAN DI PRASEKOLAH KERAJAAN DI JORDAN

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan bagi menilai status kualiti persekitaran pembelajaran di prasekolah kerajaan di Jordan berdasarkan dimensi Ruang dan Peralatan/Perkakasan, Rutin Penjagaan Peribadi; Bahasa-Penaakulan; Aktiviti; Interaksi; Struktur Program dan; Ibu Bapa dan Staf. Kajian ini juga melihat kekuatan dan kelemahan persekitaran pembelajaran berkenaan. Tambahan pula, kajian ini meneliti jika wujud perbezaan yang signifikan dari segi kualiti berasaskan lokasi prasekolah dan pengalaman guru serta mengemukakan beberapa saranan cara kualiti persekitaran pembelajaran dapat dibaiki. Reka bentuk kajian menggunakan kedua-dua pendekatan kualitatif dan kuantitatif. Populasi kajian ini terdiri dari prasekolah kerajaan di Jordan. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada 250 prasekolah dari 12 wilayah di Jordan untuk menyertai tinjauan kuantitatif dan dipilih melalui kaedah pensampelan rawak berstrata. Selain itu, persampelan bertujuan digunakan bagi mengenal pasti lapan prasekolah luar bandar untuk ditemu bual; manakala 19 prasekolah diperhatikan bagi memperoleh maklumat lengkap tentang status kualiti prasekolah tersebut. Respons daripada tinjauan dianalisis menggunakan kaedah statistik deskriptif (min, sisihan piawaian) dan korelasi. Data daripada temu bual dianalisis secara kualitatif. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa status kualiti persekitaran pembelajaran keseluruhannya berada pada tahap sederhana dan didapati bahawa dua dimensi ECERS-R, iaitu interaksi dan struktur program berada pada tahap yang tinggi. Tambahan pula, kajian ini mendapati lima dimensi berada pada tahap sederhana, iaitu ruang dan perkakasan/ peralatan, rutin penjagaan peribadi, penaakulan-bahasa, dan ibu bapa dan staf.

Dapatan juga menunjukkan bahawa tidak terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan kualiti persekitaran pembelajaran berdasarkan lokasi prasekolah, dan berdasarkan pengalaman guru. Akhir sekali, dapatan daripada kaedah kualitatif menunjukkan bahawa untuk mempertingkatkan kualiti persekitaran pembelajaran, prasekolah seharusnya menumpukan fokus pada latihan guru prasekolah, peningkatan gaji guru, penglesenan yang lebih ketat, peningkatan perkakasan/peralatan prasekolah, penambahbaikan program prasekolah dan strategi pengajaran baru yang dibentuk dan dilaksanakan oleh Kementerian Pelajaran.

THE QUALITY OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN GOVERNMENT PRESCHOOLS IN JORDAN

ABSTRACT

This study is undertaken to assess the status of the quality of the learning environment in government preschools in Jordan in terms of Space and Furnishing; Personal Care Routines; Language-Reasoning; Activities; Interaction; Program Structure; and Parents and Staff. The study also looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environment. Further, it examined if there were significant differences in the quality based on location of preschools and teacher's experience and looked for the ways in which the quality of the learning environment could be improved. The design of the study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The population of the study was the government preschools in Jordan. The sample consisted of 250 preschools in 12 provinces in Jordan which were involved in the main quantitative survey, and selected through random stratified sampling. In addition purposive sampling was used to identify eight rural preschools for interview; whilst 19 preschools were observed to get in depth- information about the status of quality in these preschools.The responses from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), and correlation. Data from interviews were analysed qualitatively. The findings of this study indicated that the status of the quality of the learning environment is at medium level whereby it was found that two dimensions of ECERS-R were at high levels of quality, namely, interaction and program structure. Moreover, this study also found five dimensions to be at medium level, and these were space and furnishing, personal care routines, language-reasoning, and parents and staff. The findings also revealed that there were

no significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on preschool's location and based on teacher's experience. Finally, the findings from the qualitative portion revealed that to improve the quality of the learning environment the preschools need to focus on training for preschool teachers, increasing their salary, stricter licensing, upgrading the furnishings of preschools, improving and implementing new instructional strategies to be developed and implemented by the Ministry of Education.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Among all the changes that have happened in early childhood education, its quality is making the greatest impact on child development (Burchinal et al., 2000a). Thus, the quality of preschool has become of increasing importance to families and stakeholders because the quality of learning environment is a form of investment in a country like Jordan where more than a quarter of the population are children (Al-Hassan, 2008).

This chapter focuses on the reasons for addressing the subject of quality in preschools. The researcher intends to provide a comprehensive study on the status of the current situation of the quality of learning environment in government preschools in Jordan. Besides this, the study will also focus on the strengths and weaknesses in the preschool learning environment and examine significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on preschool location and teachers' experiences.

To achieve this, seven dimensions of quality will be used. Additionally, it will also explain and investigate ways on improving the quality of the learning environment. This chapter presents a brief background to the study, the problem statement, research objectives, and research questions. In addition, the rationale of this research, its significance, and operational definition of key terms are also provided in this chapter.

1.2 Background of the Study

The first five years of a child's life are vital to his or her future development. During this developmental period, tremendous growth occurs (Campbell et al., 2001). It is also a time when supportive environments are important in advancing the child's development across cognitive, social, emotional and motor domains (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001).

There is a wealth of evidence coming from research on brain development which supports the view that high quality preschool children is of prime importance. For example, some studies showed that children enrolled in high quality preschools tend to be more successful in later stages of their lives (Burchinal et al., 1996; Burchinal et al., 1998; Cryer et al., 1999; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Sylva et al., 2006). Furthermore, they were more socially and emotionally capable and showed higher intellectual development during their early childhood period. Burchinal et al. (2000a) supported the view that children, who attend high quality preschools which offer greater language stimulation, show more advanced cognitive and language development. Indeed, the quality of preschools has been linked to later child-achievement outcomes and to brain and healthy development (Burchinal et al., 1996; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Hence, the level of quality within early childhood programs becomes an important factor in assessing the quality of a preschool.

There is currently increasing awareness about the importanceof quality in the field of early childhood education (Kalkan & Akman, 2009). In various countries around the world, the awareness about quality has gained considerable attention and more so because of its remarkable impact on the children's future (Anning et al., 2004). On

the other hand, the number of mothers in the workforce has exponentially increased. The large numbers of women in the workforce makes early childhood care and education an important resource for care-givers (Helburn, 1995; Dennehy & Marshall, 2005).

In contrast, low quality has often led to disappointing results (Burchinal et al., 1998; Barnett et al., 2004; Beaty, 2004). In addition, these researchers emphasized the need to have highly qualified teaching staff, knowledgeable teachers who are trained in child development, an age-appropriate curriculum, and a suitable environment in terms of safety and health (Espinosa, 2002; Ackerman, 2004).

In Jordan, the quality of preschools is of interest because of its great impact on children's development (Al-Hrob, 2008; Al-Hassan et al., 2009). The future of the Jordanian economy depends on its future workforce who should be well-educated and resourceful (Al-Khaldi, 2006). Because quality brings about positive and successful outcomes in children's development, it is thus necessary to design a comprehensive study to assess the status of the quality of the learning environment in Jordanian preschools.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In Jordan, over half the population of children between the ages of three to five are enrolled in government preschools, and the number is on the rise (Ministry of Education, 2009). A recent study conducted by the Ministry of Education (MoE) indicates that the numbers of children are expected to increase between 2008 and

2013. To accommodate this increase, additional preschools are required for this period (MoE, 2008a).

With the growth of the youth population, the Jordanian government has to ensure that the quality of education and level of skills imparted can help the new generation to compete effectively in the national and international arena (Al-Hassan, 2009). The education system in Jordan has been extensively reformed to be in line with global trends (MoE, 2008b). One of the efforts of the MoE was to heavily invest in developing the levels of learning in government preschools (MoE, 2003). Yet, despite this growth and heavy investment in preschool education, relatively little is known about the current status of preschools in Jordan after the implementation of reforms in the quality of learning (MoE, 2007).

According to Ihmedh (2008), the reform included all the provinces in Jordan; however, there is still no clear picture or feedback on the reform. Despite great efforts made by the Jordanian government, the Ministry of Education and International Institutions, there is still a dire need to fix some of the persistent problems in this sector (Hussein, 2006). In fact, Jordan still needs to focus on improving the quality of education. This is manifested in the UNICEF's publication (2009) on early childhood development (ECD) which pointed out the poor conditions in most preschools in Jordan. Moreover, education provided in Jordanian preschools mainly focused on the children's academic development, with little emphasis on other developmental areas (Emad-Aldin & Dawood, 2005).

A study conducted by Abu-Taleb (2004), and Aloutiby, (2007) pointed out that children in Grade One have fundamental weaknesses in language, cognition, and

social-skills development. Hence, they argued that it is necessary for researchers to explore the status of the learning environment in Jordanian classrooms. If any educational reform is to be successful, the quality of learning should be ensured so that the aims of the reforms are achieved. In relation to this, Aloutiby and Abu-Taleb, recommended that the preschools in Jordan should be evaluated to find out the level of quality that they offer. In this respect, they suggested that attention should be given to certain aspects such as classroom environment. Another weakness arises from the fact that the concept of quality and its dimensions are still unclear to teachers, officials, decision-makers in education, and parents. In other words, there is still a lack of knowledge and information about the indicators of quality pertaining to the learning environment in preschools in Jordan (Aloutiby, 2007). Thus, the present study seeks to assess the quality of the learning environment in Jordanian government preschools.

The researcher has noted that there is an absence of proper measuring tools to assess the quality of the learning environments. Some studies, in Al-Hrob (2008) and Ihmedh (2008) reveal that simple tools were used. Other studies carried out by Al-sror, Alnablse, and Abu-Taleb (2006), Al-sror et al. (2006), addressed different issues related to learning in preschools; however, they did not concentrate on the quality of the learning environment. They did not utilize any type of childhood environment rating scales. Hence, this study will attempt to apply a more effective assessment tool that may yield a more valid and reliable finding that can be considered useful by policy and decision-makers in the future.

Despite evidence which support the benefits of the quality of early childhood learning, a remarkable number of studies have been conducted to examine the

significance between location of preschool and teachers 'experiences with the quality of the learning environment in Jordan (MoE, 2008b). On the other hand, Al-Hrob (2008) indicated in their study that parents in Jordan believe that preschools in urban areas have higher levels of quality and that teachers who have had many years of experience are able to deal with children and understand their better needs. The present study serves either to confirm or reject this claim. It is, yet unclear in Jordan whether the teachers' experiences and location (rural and urban) can be related to higher quality preschool.

As a result, this research intends to explore the status of the quality of the learning environment in government preschools in Jordan and identify the strengths and weaknesses of these preschools. In addition, factors that influence the quality will be identified. Finally, another aim of this research is to find out ways in which the quality in the learning environment in government preschools could be improved.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The overall purpose of this research is to explore the quality of the learning environment in preschools in Jordan. As such, the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To assess the current status of the quality of the learning environment in government preschools in Jordan in terms of:

   i. Space and Furnishing
   ii. Personal Care Routines
   iii. Language-Reasoning
   iv. Activities
   v. Interaction

vi. Program Structure

vii. Parents and Staff

2. To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environment in government preschools of Jordan.

3. To examine if there are any significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on preschool location.

4. To examine if there are any significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on teachers' experiences.

5. To investigate the ways in which the quality of the learning environment in government preschools could be improved.

1.5 Research Questions

The current study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the current status of the quality of learning environments in government preschools in Jordan in terms of: i) space and furnishing, ii) personal care routines, iii) language-reasoning, iv) activities, v) interaction, vi) program structure, and vii) parents and staff?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environment in the selected government preschools?
3. Are there any significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on preschool location?
4. Are there any significant differences in the quality of the learning environment based on teachers' experiences?

5. In what ways could the quality of the learning environment in the selected government preschools be improved?

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is related to the research questions. Preschools should strive to ensure optimal learning, and provide the experience and opportunities to meet the developmental needs of children (Montes et al., 2005). They also provide opportunities for children to gain skills, abilities and values, which constitute the foundation of early learning. In this respect, the classroom environment can enable children to accomplish learning objectives in all the development domains (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). To provide an optimal picture of learning environment for children in preschools, the high quality learning environment plays a significant role and is considered the most important factor of the learning process as it is crucial in determining whether the preschools are able to serve children in terms of the variousdimensions in a preschool classroom (Catron & Allen, 2003).

Love et al. (1997) asserted that the quality of the learning environment in preschools consists of dimensions. Dimensions involve items which are in turn composed of many indicators. The learning environment, in this context, consists of seven dimensions namely: 1) Space and furnishing 2) Personal care routines 3) Language-reasoning 4) Activities 5) Interaction 6) Program structure and 7) Parents and staff (Harms et al., 1998).

The quality of these dimensions subsequently constitutes the level of quality of a preschool. First, space and furnishing which includes 6 items are used to measure accurately the quality of preschool in terms of indoor space, furniture for routine care, play, and learning, room arrangement, space for privacy, child-related display and space for gross motor play. Second is personal care routines which includes 6 items such as greeting/ departing, meals/snacks, nap/rest, toileting facilities, health practices and, safety practices. Language–reasoning is the third dimension which involves 4 items such as books, encouraging children to communicate, using language to develop reasoning skills and, informal use of language (Harms et al., 1998).

The fourth dimension is Activities which includes 8 items such as fine- motor skills, art, blocks, sand/ water, dramatic play, nature/ science, math/number, use TV, video, computer. Interaction is the fifth dimension which contains 4 items such as supervision of gross-motor activities, discipline, staff-child interaction and, interaction among children. Sixth is the program structure dimension which includes 3 items such as schedule, free play and, needs of children with disabilities. Finally, the Parents and staff dimension which comprises 6 items such as parents' needs, personal needs of staff, professional needs of staff, staff interaction and cooperation, supervision and evaluation of staff and , opportunities for professional growth (Harms et al., 1998). Based on these items, valuable assessment about the quality of preschool through the ECERS-R can be made.

According to Harms et al. (1998, 2005), the most used tool to measure the quality in the learning environment in preschools is Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R); and this also true at the current time. It is used in many

parts of the world (Clifford et al., 2005; Goelman et al., 2006; Lambert, 2008). The levels of quality range from inadequate to excellent. In the process of measuring quality, it is also important to consider not only the requirements of the indicator, but also the level of quality based on the following scales: 1- 3 (inadequate), 3-5 (medium), and 5-7 (excellent). Based on these scores, one can identify the strengths and weaknesses in the quality of learning environments in preschools according to whether the quality level is low, medium, or high because the scales provide values for each dimension (Harms & Clifford, 1980).

Besides knowing the level of each dimension in the selected government preschools in Jordan, this study will also attempt to deal with other factors affecting quality, namely demographic factors. The current study will explore if there are significant differences in the quality of preschools in different locations (i.e. rural and urban), and based on teachers' experience. Finally, this study will examine ways to improve the quality of the learning environments based on the data obtained through interviews with preschool teachers as shown in Figure 1.1.

1.7 Rationale of the Study

This study is motivated by the need to identify the current status of the quality of the learning environment in government preschools in Jordan, and to identify the factors that affect the level of quality of preschools in Jordan (such as location and teacher's experience). During the past ten years, the Ministry of Education in Jordan has adopted the principle of quality education for all (MoE, 2002). In the process of designing the vision and mission as well as strategies and polices to promote quality education at different stages, the MoE was keen to adopt a new philosophy of educational development, integrating the concept of quality education to ensure the

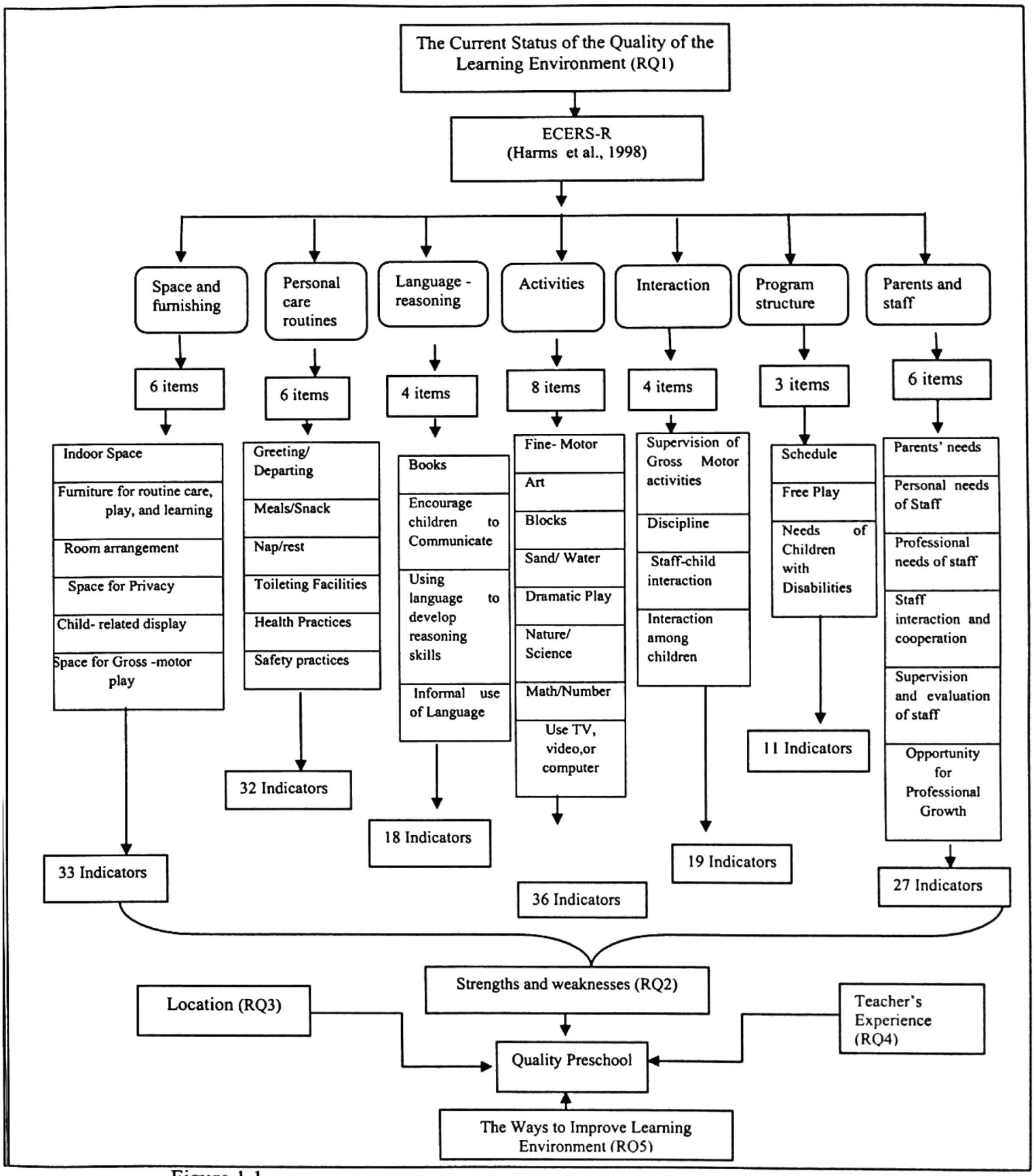

Figure 1.1

Conceptual Framework

provision of quality learning environments (MoE, 2008b). The MoE has been calling for experts and researchers to measure the quality of early childhood education (MoE, 2008a). In light of this need, the current study is in response to this call, which is to uncover the quality that exists in the preschools.

In addition, the rationale for choosing government preschools and not the private preschools is that Jordan is leading in its focus of the preschools. This is indicated by enrollment rates rising from 28 per cent to 51 per cent in government preschools between 1990-2008, which is higher than the regional levels of the Middle East and North Africa (UNICEF, 2009). Moreover, the launch of the Jordanian initiative for early childhood development in 2005 under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rania Al-Abdullah, with the goal of this initiative being to make children assets of Jordan and to encourage all children to enroll in government preschools (Htaibh, 2009; Lababneh, 2010). In Jordan, Government preschools are spread out in terms of location. In addition, various global institutions such as UNICEF and the UNESCO provide great assistance to the Jordanian government in its efforts to advance in this sector (MoE, 2010). A large majority of Jordanian children enroll in these preschools because of the free education. Finally, the researcher's experience in government preschools where she worked as supervisor of government preschools makes her familiar with the problems faced by this sector. Due to these reasons, it is appropriate that the focus of the current study should be in government preschools in order to support this sector and to carry out an investigation to observe what is going on these preschools .

1.8 Significance of the Study

The current study is important because it can provide an overall picture of the quality of the learning environment in Jordanian preschools. It is also considered a significant study because none of the previous studies have so far addressed the quality of learning environments in Jordanian preschools. Moreover, none of the earlier studies have used all the dimensions of the 'quality environment rating scale' to measure the quality of Jordanian preschools. These studies have indeed addressed the preschool learning stage, but they were limited to a few aspects such as goals of preschools and their management, whilst the present study will address multiple aspects of the preschools in Jordan. It is hoped that this study can fill the gap in the literature on this subject and will add to the literature base.

The current study is important because it will address the quality of the learning environment in early childhood education and the future of quality in government preschools. Hopefully, this research can contribute towards the making of future policies in early childhood education in Jordan, particularly with regard to overcoming the weaknesses in preschools. The study will also provide some guidelines to the Ministry of Education in Jordan so that the teachers can prepare their programs properly by enrolling into in-service training programs.

The findings of this study will also provide feedback that will help policy-makers to raise the overall quality of preschool education and develop standards that can address preschool indoor space, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff . In addition, it can concentrate on the aspects of preschool programs such as teacher-child interactions,

learning opportunities, assessment procedures, daily routines, materials, classroom environment, and health and safety routines. Moreover, this study also contributes to assisting the preschool administrators in the following ways: to properly select the teaching and administrative staff in preschools, to prepare guidelines for building environmentally conducive preschools and to oversee their implementation, and to monitor and evaluate the preschools.

Overall, it is hoped that there will be more attention in the future given to preschool learning environments to improve both learning and teaching methods if the current study finds weaknesses in the preschools. The current study hopes to provide solutions that could raise the level of quality in these preschools.

1.9 Limitations and Delimitions of the Study

According to Best and Kahn (1998), limitations are those conditions beyond the control of the study that may be considered restrictions on the research. This study also has delimitations that should be taken into account which are within the control of the researcher.

1. This study will assess the quality of learning environments based on the Early Childhood Environment Rating scale, Revised Edition (ECERS-R) (Harms et al., 1998). The scale consists of seven dimensions and 37 items namely: 1) Space and furnishing 2) Personal care routines 3) Language-reasoning 4) Activities 5) Interaction 6) Program structure and 7) parents and staff. The scale is selected as it is grounded in best practices on early childhood education, and has been proven to be a reliable and valid evaluation tool.

2. The current study will be limited to only the children aged between 4 to 5 years who are in preschool under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in Jordan.

3. The methods in this research will be quantitative (with data obtained via questionnaire), and qualitative (with data obtained through interviews and observation).

4. Generalization from the current study is limited to only the population described and cannot be applied to any other population.

5. Accuracy of results generated by this study would be limited by the validity and the extent of reliability of instruments and methods used for gathering data.

1.10 Operational Definitions

Quality (in education): Refers to a set of characteristics related to the following: better outcomes for children in the social, emotional, and cognitive domains; adequate supervision; parental involvement and communication; and classroom space that is well-organized to be used by children. In this study, it refers to three levels of quality namely: inadequate quality (score of 1-3, the preschool environment is lacking basic requirements and resources/ materials, indicating a lack of care that is not good for children's development); medium quality (score of 3-5, the preschool has minimum basic requirements and resources, indicating care that meets, to some extent, basic developmental needs); and high quality (score of 5-7, the preschool has adequate and suitable requirements and resources indicating that the basic tenets of developmentally appropriate care exist) (Burchinal et al., 2000b; Howes et al., 2008). In this study, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS-R), is used to measure processes of quality in early childhood programs. The Environment

Rating Scale is specifically designed to measure the quality in early childhood classrooms serving children aged from 3 years to 5 years (ECERS-R) (Harms et al., 1998).

Learning environment: Refers to the various aspects of the preschool setting which offers protection in terms of health and safety for children. This is the place where children grow and learn, do things such as play, explore, interact with their teachers, their peers, and materials so that they can feel comfortable. It includes social activities to ensure positive relationships between children, teachers and staff, and the environment. In this context, it specifically refers to seven dimensions of program quality: (1) space and furnishings, (2) personal care routines, (3) language-reasoning, (4) activities, (5) interactions, (6) program structure, and (7) parents and staff (Harms et al., 1998).

Government Preschools in Jordan: These are educational institutions that cater to children between the ages 4 to 5 years under the supervision of the Jordanian Ministry of Education. These institutions aim to provide an adequate educational foundation to help children have sound health habits, develop positive social relationships, foster positive attitudes towards school, and prepare them for a smooth transition from home to school. Children's attendance at preschool classes is not compulsory (MoE, 2008c).

Early Childhood Education (ECE): the term used to identify the programs that include any type of educational services that prepare the children in the early years

and is designed to develop successful learning in later schooling (Beaty & Pratta 2003).

Preschool Teachers: the term refers to the individuals who have been trained in Early Childhood Education and work with children in preschool (Beaty, 2004).

1.11 Summary

This chapter has described the reasons for undertaking this research. The chapter discussed the statement of the problem, objectives of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, rationale, significance, and the limitations of the study. A list of key terms was presented. Chapter Two will review the literature related to the quality of the preschool learning environment.

In short, the main objective of the study is to explore the current status of the quality of the learning environments in government preschools in Jordan in terms of: i) space and furnishing, ii) personal care routines, iii) language- reasoning, iv) activities, v) interaction, vi) program structure, and vii) parents and staff.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature related to the quality of the learning environment. It consists of nine main sections which are : (1) System of Education in Jordan; (2) Definition of Quality; (3) Importance of Quality; (4) Factors Influencing Quality; (5) Learning Environment; (6) Measuring Quality; (7) Related Research Studies; (8) Theoretical Framework ;and (9) Summary. Figure 2.1 (on the following page) shows the structure and design of the literature review.

2.2 System of Education in Jordan

Jordan is located in the Middle East. It is bordered by Syria in the north, Iraq in the east, Saudi Arabia in the south, and Palestine in the west. Its population is 5.7 million based on the 2005 census. Jordan is considered rich in human capital, but poor in economic resources (Al-Khaldi, 2006). Therefore, the Jordanian government decided to start a wide reform to enable the population to be productive and innovative in high quality environments. Jordan has been working consistently to ensure children get the best start for their future by providing them preschool education to stimulate them (Khattab, 2004). Thus, the first initiative was to provide the infrastructure for this level of education, and boost the economic and social sectors; to push reform forward in this respect. Jordan has made considerable effort in improving access to preschool in the government sector (MoE, 2009).

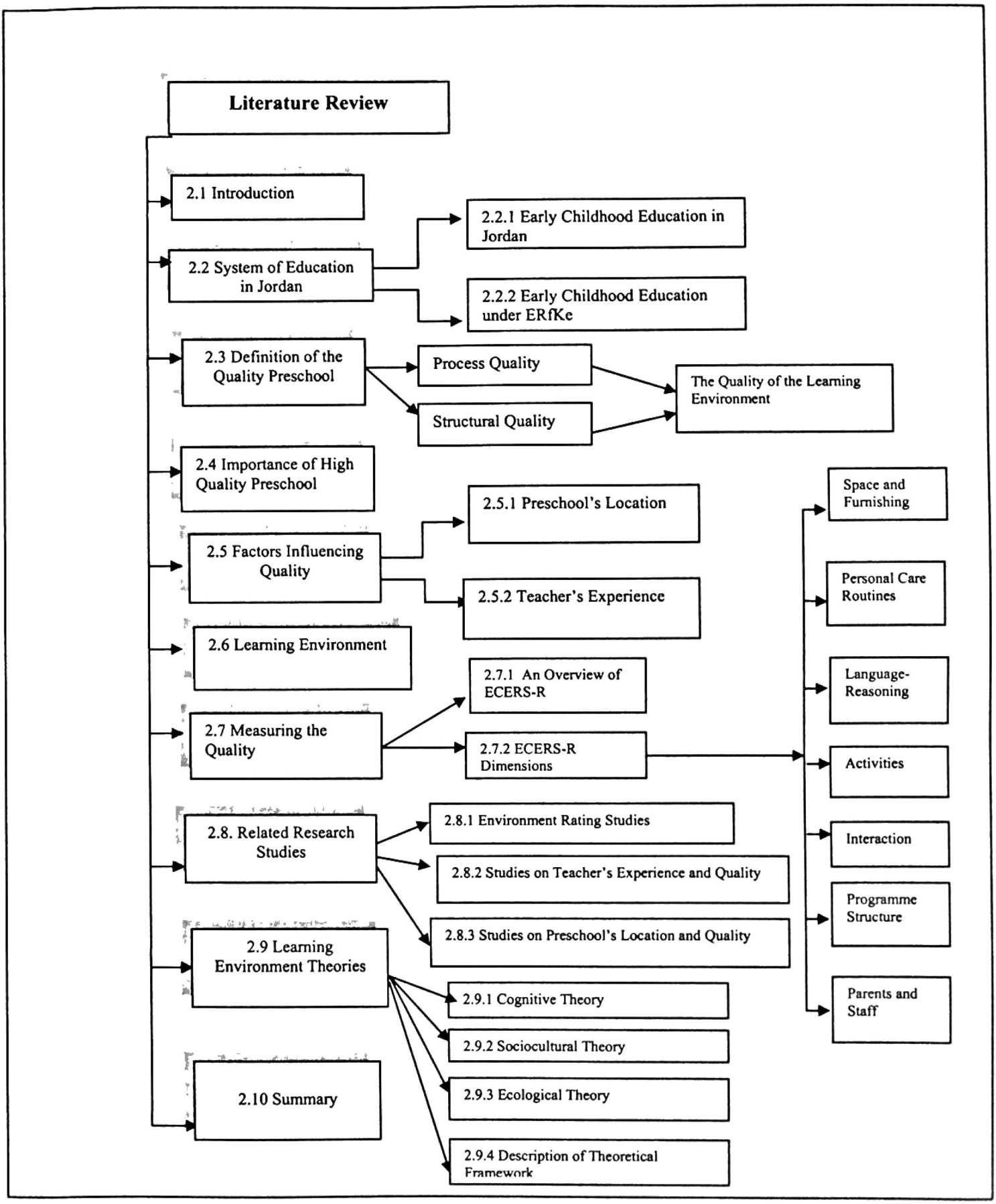

Figure 2.1
The Literature Review Design

The education system in Jordan has been undergoing improvements since the mid-twentieth century. The education system played a major role in transforming Jordan from a country predominantly agricultural to an industrial one. The education system ranks first in the Arab world, and is one of the finest education systems in the developing countries (USAID, 2006).

The educational system in Jordan is controlled by the Ministry of Education (Tawalbeh, 2001). Thus, the Ministry of Education consistently works very hard to build good quality schools and to meet the requirements for a well-educated citizenry (Hussein, 2006). Schools are also important places for innovation in Jordan (MoE, 2003). In particular, preschools are considered as the best places for developing children's future (Whitebook et al., 2004)). Education is free in government preschools and is compulsory between the ages of six to sixteen; 60% of the schools in Jordan are government-run (Emad-ALdin & Dawood, 2005).

Thus, the government of Jordan has committed to reform the education system to prepare Jordanian children for their future life in a developing society so that they can contribute to the economy of the society (MoE, 2003). There are two kinds of preschools in Jordan, namely, the government-run and the private preschools (MoE, 2000).

The Jordanian education system for preschool education is organized for children from age three years and eight months which aims to provide an appropriate learning environment to help children have healthy habits, develop social relations, promote positive attitudes toward schooling, and be prepared for a smooth transition from home to school (MoE, 2003). The structure of the educational system in Jordan is a

two-year preschool education (3-5), divided into two phases. The first phase is kindergarten (3-4 years), and the second phase is preschool (4-5 years). This is followed by ten years of compulsory basic education include (grade1 - grade 10), and two years of secondary or vocational education. The scholastic year consists of 210 days, from September to June; and there are two semesters during this year (MoE, 1988).

Children attend school five days a week, from Sunday to Thursday. All types of schools use the same syllabus and the Ministry of Education is responsible for the production and printing of textbooks (MoE, 1988; Htaibh, 2009). The challenge in Jordan is that nearly half of the population is under the age of 15 years. Therefore, the government has to make sure that young people in Jordan receive quality education and appropriate skills to prepare them for the future (Al-Khaldi, 2006). As a whole, education in Jordan is considered an important investment in the future as it provides the students with necessary skills to be good citizens to help develop the Jordanian economy (Abu Zeinh, 2009).

2.2.1 Early Childhood Education in Jordan

So far, Jordan as a developing country has paid a lot of attention to early childhood education (Khore, 2003). In response to the needs of this sector and to the development of children's education at the national level, Jordan is one of the countries in the world eager to work on and follow the Early Childhood Development (ECD) standards (MoE, 2010). As such, the Ministry of Education in 1999 established an extensive Early childhood development (ECD) Strategy that provided an overview of the current situation of children in Jordan in different areas such as childhood development, quality in preschools, physical environment in preschool,

health, safety, children with special needs, home learning environment at the family and society levels, and licensing standards for preschools (Kaga, 2007).

Because, half of Jordan's population is children and because the number of working mothers in Jordan is increasing, the government wants to provide a safe and healthy environment for children (Al-Hassan, 2005). This is a real investment in Jordan (MoE, 2008a). Despite the fact that the Jordanian government is trying to improve early childhood education, much needs to be done in the area of the quality of learning environment (Al-Hassan et al., 2009).

The MoE has worked effectively and made some improvements by completing some plans and projects such as: (1) The issuance of the national interactive curriculum; (2) Setting the criteria and the conditions of licensing preschool and kindergartens; (3) Preparing training courses to all teachers in government preschools (Wisconsin University Programme); (4) Coordinating with the Jordanian universities to provide early childhood education majors in order to improve teachers; and (5) Working on legislation which would entrench children in the best possible environment, supportive of their health, safety, and optimal development (MoE, 2002).

Queen Rania established an academy for teacher training in 2008 as an independent institution to prepare and improve teachers as part of the implementation of educational policies in Jordan (UNESCO, 2006, 2008). She believes that educational training centers in each province can provide each teacher with the skills needed. She stated that education is a national priority to strengthen the role of the educational process in creating a skillful individual at the local level and for the Arab nation. She

stressed that access to high-quality education is a key factor in determining the opportunities that will be available for the children in the future (UNICEF, 2000).

2.2.2 Preschools in Jordan

Preschools in Jordan are divided into private and government preschools. Government preschools provide free education. In Jordan, government preschools are usually part of the the elementary schools. Children start attending preschool at the age of 4 until they are at least 5 years old. Conversely, private preschools are located as a separate entity or building. In addition, private preschools consists of three years of preschool education, where the children may attend at age 2 or 3 years. The three-year program, known as nursery, kindergarten 1 (K1) and kindergarten 2 (K2) prepares children for their first year in primary school education. Some private preschools further divide nursery into N1 and N2. In addition, the government preschools offer half-day care between 8a.m. to 12.30 p.m., whilst, private preschools provide full- day care to children between 8a.m. to 7p.m. The curriculum covers Arabic, Religion, English, Mathematics and other subjects in private preschools. But the government preschools' curriculum differs from that of private preschools. Some private preschools follow the curricula of countries like the U.S. and Britain, but the government is committed to implementing the curriculum of the Ministry of Education. Private preschools' monthly fees vary. Jordanian parents often send their children to private preschools to give them a good foundation in English, because most of them concentrate on English (Al-hjj-Mohammed, 2006).

On the other hand, the government preschools teach completely in Arabic. Both government and private preschools are supervised by the Ministry of Education. The

aim of both government and private preschools in Jordan is to provide children with a good learning environment to promote balanced development of a child. Finally, these two kinds of institutions enroll well over 90 percent of all children prior to their entrance into the formal system at first grade (MoE, 2002).

Additionally, children with disabilities are also enrolled in both government and private preschools. In preschool education, children with disabilities are guaranteed protection and all the benefits of education. Thus, the Ministry of Education provides appropriate education for them. Every child with special needs has the right to education through specially designed environment to serve them, including, specially designed instruction provided or supervised by a licensed, qualified special education teacher. These programs will allow them to participate in activities with other children and integrate them into the normal group.

2.2.3 Early Childhood Education under ERfKE

The Government of Jordan has launched an Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy Programme (ERfKE) (MoE, 2003). The Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the project (ERfKE) in 2003; this project is the first of its kind in the region. It is one of the most important education programmes in Jordan; (Al-Hassan et al., 2009). The reform was started from the preschool level to the secondary school level. The first phase of the reform, which covered the years 2003 – 2008 is known as ERfKE I. The second phase of the reform, ERfKE II includes the years 2009 – 2013. Therefore, Jordan has been in the period of education reform since 2003. Four major components in (ERfKE) had been identified, namely:

(1) Restructuring the education policy objectives;

(2) The learning outcomes relevant to knowledge economy;

(3) Supporting the quality of the learning environments; and

(4) Expanded early childhood education (MoE, 2002; Al-hjj-Mohammed, 2006).

The third component focuses on implementing a comprehensive approach to ensure the quality of early childhood learning and incorporates sub-components, where they interact and have an impact on each other (Al-hjj-Mohammed, 2006). This has been made possible through increasing institutional building capacity by licensing standards for preschool, curriculum, accreditation, redesigning the education policies to be in line with the needs of a knowledge-based economy. Licensing involves the minimal conditions to protect health and safety of children; it also and includes requirements regarding the curriculum, facilities, the characteristics of the building and the classroom in terms of size, furniture, and gross motor materials, heating, ventilation, toilets, outdoor and indoor. (Al-Hassan, 2008; UNICEF, 2009).

As for expanding preschools for the poor by constructing, furnishing and equipping classrooms of the preschools for the most disadvantaged communities (Abu-Taleb, 2008), the government has been building new preschool classrooms in rural areas to enable low-income families to register their children in government preschools. In addition, the reform aims at enriching the classroom environment through involving the experiences and expertise of parents in facilitating children's learning. This initiative involves inviting family and relatives such as sisters and aunts, to attend the classroom (Al-Hassan, 2007).